OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

ROBERT VAN LEEUWEN

An unqualified evil

Dear President McInnis,

As you know, I was twice subjected to racist harassment on Yale's campus. During our 60th class reunion in May, a '66 classmate whom I don't even know, in the presence of my wife repeatedly questioned our family name while moving his hands, camera-style, around my face. This amplified his previous, equally degrading racist conduct at our 50th class reunion, questioning my name, "examining" me with distaste and saying: "You don't look like a Van Leeuwen." Both witnessed incidents were reported in writing to the Yale Alumni Association's Alison Cole '99, yourself and our class officers.

In 2018, Yale President Peter Salovey publicly stated, "Racism is an unqualified evil in our society." In your inaugural remarks, you said, "The schoolhouse belongs to all of us." These words leave no place for racist harassment on Yale's campus.

Yet, when I sent you three letters, appealing to you to condemn racist harassment unequivocally, you did not do so. I never asked you for a public statement. You sent me an unacceptable, dismissive response and never even answered my second and third appeals to you.

The Reunion Code of Conduct, introduced last year, prohibits harassment. Abidance is required. Mine being the test case of its violation, its import extends to the entire Yale community. While your record, regrettably, tells me it does not, I ask you now: Does Yale, in fact, unequivocally condemn racist harassment occurring on its campus and reported to you?

> DOES YALE, IN FACT, UNEQUIVOCALLY CONDEMN RACIST HARASSMENT OCCURRING ON ITS CAMPUS AND REPORTED TO YOU?

I explained to you the deep, lasting harm caused by racist harassment, and the most important thing Yale can do to mitigate that harm.

My complaint to the YAA was shared with you. There I wrote that to be the victim of this treatment is an unforgettable, humiliating experience, an assault on the very core of a person's identity and sense of self-worth. I know, I wrote. I have experienced such incidents since my early childhood.

A perfunctory June 17 email from Alison Cole informed me that "correspondence" had been sent to the perpetrator, closing my case. Incomprehensibly, there was nothing condemning his racist harassment.

How does Yale now lead in responding to this evil? I asked you. The lasting cost to me and my family is immeasurable, and when Yale abandons me in an assault on my core identity on its campus, it effectively expels me from the Yale community. I asked you to right this wrong.

It is the perpetrator, not the victim of racist harassment who should feel excluded from the Yale community.

Your June 23 response: "Thank you for … bringing these troubling allegations to my attention. I am sorry for the pain you and your wife describe experiencing …

"Yale expects every member of our community to be treated with dignity and respect, and we actively work to combat discrimination and harassment. Conduct that undermines these principles is incompatible with the standards we set for gatherings on our campus, including reunion activities.

"I understand that Alison Cole is looking into this serious matter, and I have asked her to follow up with you soon."

This is a stunning abdication of moral responsibility. Suddenly, after the YAA's closure of my case, the incidents I suffered became "allegations." The pain my wife and I experienced became the pain we "described experiencing." Conduct undermining Yale's expectation of dignity and respect, which must include all degrading treatment, is merely "incompatible with the standards we set." "Incompatibility" is a word verging on moral neutrality. Colors of clothing and other objects may be incompatible, as may car parts. Where do your hollow words show the courage to take a clear stand, of humanity, of empathy?

Where is Yale's condemnation of racist harassment, indispensable to its victims? The words "race" and "color" are glaringly absent, though both appear in Yale's Standards of Conduct and College Regulations; they are also absent from the 2025 Reunion Code of Conduct. And asking Cole to follow up with me was disingenuous.

All members of the Yale community deserve in Yale's president the humanity that extends to all victims of racist harassment and other degrading treatment, and the moral fortitude unequivocally to condemn such treatment on Yale's campus. Your response is a record of failure, not an example for inevitable future incidents.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

MIA GORLICK

Foreignness is your intellectual foe

There is one truth that I find critical to the understanding of our connections to ourselves, our capabilities and other people: language holds immense power.

The moment we assign a qualifier to a word or phrase, we fundamentally change our orientation to and perception of the concept. Every word possesses a connotation. Therefore, every word wields immense psychological and social power.

To call a language foreign is to concretize it as something separate from you, to relegate it to a realm beyond your intrinsic capabilities. To call a language foreign is to create two groups, to bisect one line, to create an us and a them, to confirm your inability before you have the chance to learn.

Scientifically, foreignness is often perceived as a threat: foreign species upend ecosystems, foreign ecosystems threaten species, bodies reject foreign objects and "foreign substance" is often a euphemism for poison. We acknowledge that which is different from us as potentially threatening to our survival. Histories of persecution and studies of early human tribal dynamics affirm this.

Simultaneously, we have established a very pigeonholed prevailing definition of foreignness — among contemporary laypeople, it has become a dubious status conferred on those who differ from us in terms of race, ethnicity or nationality.

In academic spaces, the foreign language exists as a core branch of study involving the pursuit of languages spoken anywhere in the world outside of one's native tongue, encompassing modern, classical and sign languages. Even in spaces where the phraseology has morphed into "world languages" or simply "languages," the connotation of foreignness remains ingrained.

This is the power of language that I aim to elucidate: its connotative and rhetorical meaning transcend its usage, generating long-term impacts even after the word itself becomes obsolete. This connotation not only makes each language foreign in the eyes of its learner, but makes the entire concept of foreign language an entity separate from every other discipline — it is fundamentally difficult to learn, and we are fundamentally out of our element while learning it.

But what is music if not a foreign language? What is math? What is chemistry, or philosophy? We are not born into an intrinsic knowledge of clefs and time signatures. We are not born knowing the quadratic formula or redox reactions or the writings of Kant.

Between Plato and Portuguese, why is only the latter considered foreign? Everything that we have ever learned is an unfamiliar language in its own right. Yet in calling one specific branch of knowledge foreign, we make it more inaccessible.

We have trained ourselves to view non-native languages as something we inherently cannot share in or fully cultivate. The relationship is complex and may be contentious. The new language intrudes upon us, inhibiting our natural stream of consciousness and requiring us to think with painstaking diligence. Simultaneously, we are intruders upon a culture and people, with any errors potentially reflecting a lack of care, awareness or respect. How can we optimize our learning and growth in an environment so hostile to exploration?

In truth, your mere existence as a human being with at least one identifiable skill is proof that you are quite good at some kind of foreign language. In fact, your existence comprises one eight-billionth of my evidence that we have all mastered some foreign language, even though we don't identify it as such.

By using language to label areas of knowledge as alien and inaccessible, we have done nothing more than blind ourselves to our own capacity. If language is foreign, so is everything else. If you can do one of anything among everything else, you have mastery over something foreign.

> EVERYTHING THAT WE HAVE EVER LEARNED IS AN UNFAMILIAR LANGUAGE IN ITS OWN RIGHT. YET IN CALLING ONE SPECIFIC BRANCH OF KNOWLEDGE FOREIGN, WE MAKE IT MORE INACCESSIBLE.

Innate human curiosity is more fundamental to the process of mastery than the semantic roadblocking that inhibits us. All languages are equally accessible until we learn one and decide all others are foreign. We must reframe this.

I encourage you to consider the power of language beyond purely linguistic or academic spaces. What does this seemingly innocuous word mean when applied to places? To people? How much do we lose every time we use a qualifier to impose a barrier between ourselves and the rest of the world?

It's astonishing what one little "foreign" can do.

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STAFF COLUMNISTS

IAN MCCORMICK

Grief and loss

On my morning stroll to class last Wednesday, I saw two sides of one of the most pressing global issues of our lifetime. At Cross Campus, I was met with a memorial in remembrance of the Israeli lives that were tragically stolen on Oct. 7, 2023. Further down, on Beinecke Plaza, lay an assemblage of protesters that aimed to recognize the struggles and oppression of the Palestinian people. These disparate displays have since garnered much attention; specifically the choice of Yalies4Palestine to use Oct. 7 as a day of silent protest. Some approved; others did not.

Oct. 7 was a brutal, heart-wrenching massacre, and Hamas remains fully responsible for the depravity and death visited upon innocent people. Many who were murdered were of similar age to the students who live on campus and attend this University. Regardless of your beliefs, I hope we can agree that nothing can minimize these iniquities nor bring back the estimated 1,200 lives lost that day. Yet can the same not be said for the 74,000 Palestinians killed following the attack, a number that is likely an underestimate and continues to grow? Whether the violence that has subsequently ensued should be labeled as genocide, collective punishment or ethnic cleansing is a separate concern; no term or phrase can encapsulate the enormity of such loss. I cannot claim to grasp every nuance of this conflict. But I can recognize grief. So, was the protest on Beinecke Plaza really so ill-conceived? I think not.

To the reader, I ask if you can recall a widely recognized, annual day of mourning at Yale dedicated to the Palestinian lives lost since Oct. 7. I certainly can't. Although vigils and demonstrations have commemorated Palestinian suffering, no comparable occasion of remembrance seems to have taken hold on campus. Why, then, should we condemn Yalies4Palestine for choosing Oct. 7? Sure, other dates could work. Nevertheless, Oct. 7 was a tragedy for both the Israelis and the Palestinians, serving as the catalyst for the cruelties that have persisted and continue to unfold before our eyes. I believe it is, in fact, in good faith to mourn both the Israeli and Palestinian lives that have been lost since three years ago. Recognizing the latter does not disparage the former.

> I BELIEVE IT IS, IN FACT, IN GOOD FAITH TO MOURN BOTH THE ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN LIVES THAT HAVE BEEN LOST SINCE THREE YEARS AGO.

I fear that Palestinian support is too often pushed into a box. Rhetoric which associates denunciations of Israel with commendations of Hamas is damaging to all parties involved and risks precluding reasoned dialogue. Neither I nor anyone else should continue to see the world through such a limited scope. We can always valorize our side and demonize the other. We can claim absolution from our chosen deity or foundational touchstone, without limit and without reservation. Yet even in the hothouse atmosphere of this historical moment, perhaps respectful debate is possible.

No longer can we blame the crimes of Israel on Hamas, just as we cannot forget the individuals who were murdered in the Gaza envelope three years ago. Yale must have room for civil activism at any time, date or place. So I ask you then: can there be a day for mourning? If not a day, then I ask for a week; if not a week, then I ask for a year; if not a year, then I ask for a day. Yalies4Palestine chose the day, and I hope we continue to mourn. And if you disagree, then I welcome your disagreement. We may not be perfect, but we can be good.

Last Wednesday marked the anniversary of an atrocity, but it also marked three years of perpetual loss. Yale Friends of Israel and Chabad at Yale were well within their right to mourn the lives lost. So were Yalies4Palestine.

Free Palestine.

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